

## Colonel John Johnston's "Biography of Tecumtha" (1854)

*[Text prepared by Caitlin Metheny.]*

[From the *Dayton Gazette*.]

MESSRS. EDITORS: —I am requested by an old and esteemed friend to give some account of the celebrated warrior, Tecumtha, I state the Indian orthography, which, it will be perceived, is somewhat different from the common practice of writing his name, the interpretation of which, substantially is, the Panther or Tiger crouching ready to pounce on its prey—a name most appropriate and characteristic of the man.

Tecumtha was a Native Shawanoese, born on the banks of Mad River, near the site of the present city of Springfield, Clarke county, Ohio, about the year 1770, and was of unadulterated Indian blood, both by father and



*Nineteenth-Century Ohio Literature* pairs forgotten readings with new essays that explain them. In this installment, we have a biography of the Shawnee leader Tecumseh by Colonel John Johnston (here and, in some sources, spelled *Johnson*), who worked for decades as an "Indian agent"—an official liaison between the US government and indigenous peoples—at Fort Wayne and Piqua. This reading is followed by a critical essay by Caitlin Metheny. *Nineteenth-Century Ohio Literature* is edited by Jon Miller at The University of Akron. For more information, visit [ideaexchange.uakron.edu/nineteenthcenturyohioliterature](https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/nineteenthcenturyohioliterature).

mother. His father became a distinguished war chief, and fell in the battle of Point Pleasant, Kanawha, in 1774. The hatred of the son to the white man was doubtless much aggravated by this occurrence. Tecumtha never was a chief in any sense of the term. Having failed to involve his nation in war with the United States, he early separated himself from the government and control of his legitimate chiefs, and established himself at the head of certain banditti in 1806 on the Wabash, near the mouth of Tippecanoe river. His followers and adherents here were composed of outlaws from the Indian tribes, principally from those west and adjacent to the Mississippi. The largest number were of the Winebagoes, although the hearts of all were estranged from us, mainly by reason of our frequent encroachments upon their country, driving them farther and farther from the graves and homes of their ancestors. The frontier tribes, embracing the Wyandots, Delawares, Shawanoese, Miamies, Senecas, and many of the Ottawa and Potawatimie towns, being more immediately under our control, and within the reach of chastisement, were afraid to join in any hostile demonstrations against us; not many persons of the tribes named were found in the ranks of Tecumtha.

The Kickapoo tribe of the Shawanoese, of which Tecumtha was a member, were invariably distinguished for their hatred to the white race. Often when the chiefs were disposed to make peace, persons of this tribe would go off clandestinely and commit murder on the frontier, in order to defeat their proposed intent. The tribe was nearly annihilated in the year 1812. Nearly all the murders on the north-western frontiers during that period were perpetrated by them. At the Pigeon Roost in Indiana, where twenty old men, women and children



*Nameplate of the Gallipolis Journal. Ohio History Connection.*

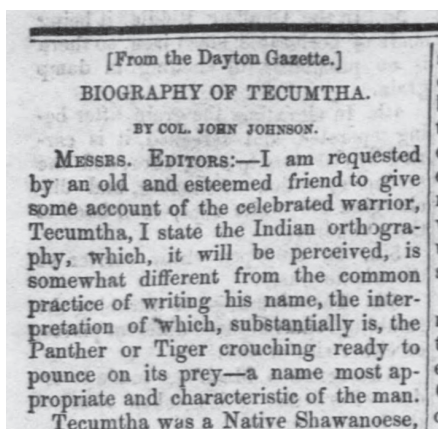
were murdered, the leader of the party, one Pasheto, a notorious villain, was of this tribe, as were most of his party. My own life was several times in jeopardy from this daring assassin. He was killed after the war of 1812 in a personal encounter with one of his own people, at Malden, on the English side of Detroit river. He was stabbed in the vitals through the liver, but lived afterwards seventeen days; the Indians affirming the Great Spirit had thus procrastinated his sufferings, as a punishment for his manifold coldblooded cruelties.

My personal intercourse with Tecumtha was of short duration, he having left his nation soon after my agency for them commenced, and before he had acquired any great amount of celebrity as a warrior and leader. His habit was to shun as much as possible, all intercourse with United States officers, or persons in authority. He was known to say, that he never looked on the face of a white man, without horror or feeling his flesh creep on his bones. In person he was about five feet ten inches, compactly built and well-formed for strength and agility. He would receive no presents for himself, and when anything was given, he would throw the article contemptuously to his followers. His garments were all made of deer skin, dressed and made up by the women. He was killed at the battle of the Thames near the end of the year 1813 and aged about forty-four years.

Finding the English no longer able to protect the Indian allies, their fleet on the Lake captured, their army under Proctor defeated, the cause hopeless, it was doubtless the desire of Tecumtha to perish in the last onslaught. He sought death and met it, but at whose hands is, I think a matter of uncertainty. Anthony Shane, a half-breed raised among the Indians, one of my Interpreters, was in the battle, examined the body of Tecumtha, and affirmed he was not the Indian killed by Col. R. M. Johnson.—Tecumtha in early life had his thigh bone broken, and where the bone united, a ring had formed around the fracture, which could be felt by the hand. This mark was not on the Indian killed by Johnson. I heard General Harrison in 1839, interrogated on the stand at Piqua, Ohio, as to his belief who killed Tecumtha. His reply was that he did not know.

Tecumtha was for a few times guest at my table at Fort Wayne. He would not taste any intoxicating liquor, drinking nothing but pure water; would eat meat, potatoes, and corn bread, and very sparingly of those. His whole course in view of his people, was to teach them by precept and example to become independent of the white race.

He took a wife agreeable to the urgent request of his friends; it was evident, however, he had little partiality for the softer sex. The wife and himself occupied the same cabin, but had separate beds. A son was born, who had grown to mature years in my time—a very common person, bearing no resemblance either in person or character to his reputed father. He continued to reside with the Shawanoese at Wapaghkonetta until 1826, when he emigrated to the south-west of Missouri.



*Start of "Biography of Tecumtha." Ohio History Connection.*

Although Tecumtha became renowned in war, it is undeniably true, that he ran away the first battle he was engaged in. This fact I received from Cutewekasa or Black Hoof, the head chief, who was in the action. He was never known to flinch afterwards. The increase of our population north of the Ohio river, and the frequent demand upon the Indians for more of their lands, alarmed the nations occupying and claiming the Territory now embraced within the States of Ohio and Indiana—a subject of all others best calculated to inflame the minds of the natives. Although Tecumtha had no right to interfere in a question involving the title to territory, the Shawanoese having come into the northwest within a comparatively short period, and being considered by the other tribes somewhat in the light of tenants at will, he was too wily not to take advantage of the excited feelings of the Indians arising from

the loss of their country. This was the commencement of his turbulent career. He appeared too late upon the stage of action; such a spirit fifty or sixty years earlier, might have set bounds to the progress of the white man in the West. In contemplating the wretched fate of the natives of this continent, we are almost instinctively led to approve a sentiment uttered many years ago in the House of Representatives in Congress by Mr. Hopkinson, of Pennsylvania, "that when he beheld the wrongs and ruin of the Indian race, he almost wished that the mariner's compass had never been invented."

The brother of Tecumtha, who claimed inspiration as a prophet of the Great Spirit, was a very different character; what we would call a brawling, unprincipled demagogue. He encouraged the Indians to war against the Americans, but took care himself to keep out of danger. At the battle of Tippecanoe and the Thames, although present, he took no part in the fight. In the outset of his career as a prophet, he took the name of Elsquataway, the meaning of which is, a new way, a door of hope for the Indians. Pending the war of 1812 his influence was great, drawing crowds after him. None of his prophecies being fulfilled, after the overthrow at the battle of the Thames he sunk into contempt and forgetfulness, and finally removed with his people in 1826 southwest of Missouri.

I had much more to do with the Prophet than with his brother Tecumtha, and on the whole formed a very contemptible opinion of him. He possessed none of the noble qualities of his race; neither truth, honor, honesty or courage. After the war of 1812, he avoided me as much as possible, and seldom appeared in Council with his people, ashamed and afraid to meet me. I had repeatedly warned him of taking up the hatchet against us, and

joining the English, and that the result would be the ruin of his people, all of which turned out true to the letter. It is due to the memory of Black Hoof and his associate chiefs, to say that they used every means in their power to prevent their people from taking part in the war, and with the exception of the Prophet's tribe, they remained faithful to their engagements with the United States. It is seldom that a tribe is unanimous for war; the nation never is, and within the memory of the oldest men among them, it is not recollected that much more than half of the nation have been for war at the same time, or taken, as they express it, the war talk. War is always determined on by the head warrior of a town or district which has in their own estimation been injured. He lifts the war hatchet and is followed by all who are for war. The head chief and his counsellors sometimes interpose and arrest the further progress of the party for war. This is not often attended with success; because the law, "blood for blood," predominates, and the right of satisfaction is conceded to the injured party, to the town and tribe to which he belongs. Peace is always determined on and concluded by the head Chief of the nation and his counsellors, and peace talks or communications are always addressed to them. In some cases where the resentment of the warriors runs high, the Chief and his counsellors have been much embarrassed.

In case of murder the family alone of the deceased have the right to take satisfaction. The rulers of a town or the nation have nothing to do or say in the business. The relations of the deceased person consult first among themselves, and if the case is clear, and the family not likely to suffer by their decision, they determine on the case definitely.—When their tribe may be affect-

ed by it, in a doubtful case, or an old claim for satisfaction, the family consult them, and when they have resolved on satisfaction, they take the guilty one, if to be come at; if he flies, they take the nearest of kin. In some cases the family who have done the injury promise reparation, and in the case are allowed a reasonable time to fulfil their promise; and they are generally earnest of themselves in their endeavors to put the guilty to death to save an innocent person.

The right of judging and taking satisfaction being invested in the individual family or tribe, is the sole cause why the treaty stipulations between the United States and the Indian tribes, respecting murder, are so seldom executed. In like manner a prisoner taken in war is the property of the captor and his family; it being optional with the captor to kill or save at the time. This right is sometimes purchased with property.

During my agency for the Miamies, a shocking murder was committed on the widow of the Toad, who was one of their beloved men. The woman lived alone and was well off with clothing, trinkets, and furniture. She took for a companion and fellow-lodger, a single woman of the same nation. This person, coveting her property and ornaments, basely murdered her benefactor in the night, by battering her skull with a large stone; then robbed the house and fled, seeking concealment in the wilderness. The victim, who was named Jenny by the ladies of the Fort, was a great favorite with all, often assisting them in sewing and making quilts. A universal wish was expressed at the garrison and among the Indians, to have the murdered apprehended; after some weeks she was brought in, and her own father appointed jailor, until her fate could be decided upon.



No influence from any quarter was used to save her, the brother of the deceased was appointed to execute the law. Armed with a tomahawk, at the appointed time he passed through the town, and when opposite the cabin where the murderer was kept, her father thrust her out of the door and she was put to death on the spot. Thus ended the matter, nor did any bad feeling ever after arise between the family or friends of the parties. Atonement had been made, life for life, and all were settled. During the time I was commissioner for treating with the Wyandots of Sandusky, in 1841 and '42, a murder had occurred in the nation, between two of their people. The chiefs having become somewhat familiarized to our laws, took the matter into their own hands, consulted and decreed the execution of the murderer, and he was publicly shot accordingly.

This was the first instance of departing from the primitive custom of taking satisfaction for the loss of life. Since that time, the Wyandots made a treaty with the United States relinquishing their Tribal character, and providing for their becoming citizens of the Union; for reasons unknown to the public, that provision of the treaty was stricken out by the Senate. During the administration of Mr. Monroe, and at his instance, a similar attempt was made in some of our treaties with the natives of the Northwest, and with the further provisions of dividing their lands and giving the fee of six hundred and forty acres to each head of a family. These stipulations were also vetoed by the Senate. Doubtless that body had good and sufficient reasons in the opinions of the members for so acting, yet it must readily occur to the minds of any one acquainted with the condition of the Indians, their past history and future prospects,

that if some such security is not provided for them, a few more generations will witness the total extinction of their race, and then how the weeping page of history will tell of the wrongs and blasted faith visited on the red men by the rulers and people of this nation! How keenly all our sensibilities are enlisted in the cause of the African, yet not a voice is scarcely heard in or out of Congress, to vindicate the claims of the Indian. Is it because no political capital can be made out of the misfortunes of the latter?

For many successive years the chief Black Hoof was one of my companions in my early excursions among the Indians. He had lived long, was intelligent, and had more of the history of his people on his mind than any of his nation.

Our talk sometimes extended far into the night, around the camp fire. The subject of removal to the West was often discussed. In adverting to the distress which these matters occasioned to his people, he would conclude by saying, 'We will go anywhere if you will let us alone; but we know by experience, go where we may, your people will follow us, drive us again and again, until we reach the seas beyond the mountains, and then we must jump off;'—meaning there would be no resting place for them, at last, on the face of the earth. At this very moment, attempts are making to purchase out and remove the Indians who only a few years ago emigrated from Ohio to the new territory of Nebraska. Is it any wonder that they so obstinately refuse to receive the religion or the arts of civilized and Christian people?

In 1842, nine men, women and children of the Seneca and Delaware Indians, were barbarously murdered within the limits of what is now Madison county, In-

diana, by a company of five lawless white men. The slightest provocation was not alleged for the outrage; the victims being among the peaceable and inoffensive of their race. The particulars of this horrid tragedy are not fit for the public eye. As soon as I was informed of the outrage, being fully aware of the danger that awaited the frontier settlers from the enraged Indians, I repaired to the scene of action, raised and alarmed the country, got a party in pursuit, and apprehended four of the murderers. The principal actor having escaped, as was afterwards ascertained, changed his name and enlisted in the army. I had a jail built, picketed in, procured bolts, bars and locks, and employed a guard to insure the safety of the prisoners.

The Governor of the State, apprehending his popularity with the people, declined interfering. I reported the case to Mr. Calhoun, then at the head of the War Department, who promptly responded to my call by giving me full power and authority to prosecute the murderers, to spare no expense and to draw on him for funds. Able counsel was employed on both sides, and, after a delay of fourteen months, the murderers were convicted and ordered for execution. Gov. Ray, who was then in the Executive chair, was kind enough to attend a short distance from the execution, for the purpose of communication, should it be found advisable to pardon any of the criminals. The son of S., being under age, and as it appeared coerced by his father into the murder, with the consent of the Indian Chiefs who were at my urgent solicitations present and witnessed the execution, was pardoned by the Governor; the other three suffered.

The Indians had never before witnessed an execution by hanging, and they were affected to tears at

the death-struggle of the unhappy men. Thus was the justice of the country, at least for once, vindicated in the sight of the Indians, and they were content, thanks to Mr. Calhoun, who, with all his political aberrations, was an honest and honorable man. The whole affair from first to last, cost the United States seven thousand dollars. The money was well spent, as the execution of the murderers doubtless saved many innocent persons from savage vengeance. This case is most respectfully held up to the view of those speculative, benevolent and misguided persons, who advocate the abolishment of capital punishment in all cases whatsoever.

*Note on the text*

“Biography of Tecumtha” has been transcribed from the June 29, 1854, *Gallipolis Journal*. In the original, the author chose to write the name Tecumseh as “Tecumtha” to represent the pronunciation of the warrior’s name. The author also uses alternative spellings (“Shawanoese” for Shawnee). This edition preserves consistent usage of such spellings, since they do not affect the understanding of the text. Inconsistencies in spelling, however—such as “Missiouri” and “Missouri,” “Wyandots” and “Wyandottes,”—have been changed to be consistent throughout the text. And three noticeable typographic inaccuracies have been modified since they are believed to have been printing errors: this text supplies a missing hyphen (“well formed” has been changed to “well-formed”), closes a space (“any thing” has been changed to “anything”), and separates two words (“thematter” has been changed to “the matter”).

## Comment on Colonel John Johnston's "Biography of Tecumtha"

*Caitlin Metheny*

Since his death in 1813, the Shawnee warrior Tecumseh (c. 1768–1813) has been memorialized by numerous historians. As R. David Edmunds explains in his biographical article for the *Western Historical Quarterly*, the British and American officers both spoke highly of the Shawnee warrior in their reports, especially during the War of 1812. Tecumseh's leadership in this war created a legend with superhuman qualities (261). Until recently Tecumseh's brother, Tenskwatawa (The Prophet), however, has been historically preserved—as Alfred Cave describes in his article for the *Journal of the Early Republic*—as “shrewd, cunning, superstitious, fanatical, cowardly and cruel, utterly lacking in those qualities of courage, grace and magnanimity that elevated his warrior brother to greatness” (637). As this essay will illustrate in depth, comparison of old and new biographies of the Shawnee brothers helps us to understand both the actual history of early nineteenth-century Ohio and the way that this history has been written and revised over the past two centuries.

This edition presents the “Biography of Tecumtha” published in an 1854 issue of the *Gallipolis Journal*, a newspaper published in Gallipolis, Ohio. A thriving village in southeast Ohio on the Ohio River, Gallipolis had about 2200 inhabitants in 1854 (Baldwin and Thomas 413). The *Gallipolis Journal* indicates that the

text was copied from the *Dayton Gazette*; located in southwest Ohio north of Cincinnati, Dayton was Ohio's fourth-largest city in 1854, with about sixteen thousand inhabitants (Baldwin and Thomas 309).

In this letter to the editor, American Indian Agent Colonel John Johnston recounts his experiences with the Shawnee brothers Tecumseh and The Prophet. In a biography posted on a website for genealogical researchers of Miami County, Ohio, Johnston is credited for keeping the peace between about ten thousand Indians and settlers in many northwestern territories. His role as an Indian agent is described as being distinguished by "the integrity of the man, the honesty of his dealings with the Indians, [and] his humane and judicious policy with them and his fidelity to the government" ("Colonel").

In his letter, Johnston presents common facts about the Shawnee brothers—as they were written by Benjamin Drake (c. 1795–1841) and other early Tecumseh biographers. Present-day Tecumseh scholars believe some of the information presented as fact in these early biographies is inaccurate; they argue that earlier biographers painted the Shawnee brothers in a false light. Gregory Dowd, Alfred Cave, John Sugden, and R. David Edmunds explain that early historians and biographers could have romanticized information of doubtful authenticity from unreliable sources. Colonel Johnston's account also differs from accounts given by other Indian agents and government leaders. Modern scholars believe the falsified reports from agents and United States government leaders were used to justify violent acts against tribes (Edmunds 275).

Although John Johnston's letter to the editor is labeled as the "Biography of Tecumtha," he spends little time discussing the biography of the great Shawnee warrior. He, instead, depicts a basic overview of his interactions with Tecumseh and The Prophet, as well as their influence over the Shawnee. Johnston also paints an image of how clans reacted to the push from the American government during his time as Indian Agent and how tribes, generally, agreed to enter war. As previously stated, Johnston's account does not align with themes of modern Tecumseh documentation. It is worth noting where the differences lie and why the differences may exist.

The beginning of Johnston's letter to the editor supports the general understanding historians have of Tecumseh's early life: he was born the son of a war chief in 1768 near the Scioto River in Ohio. In his letter to the editor, Johnston refers to Tecumseh as "Tecumtha," stating that the orthography of his name means "the Panther or Tiger crouching ready to pounce on its prey," which historians believe references a clan affiliation to Tecumseh's father's tribe. During the American Revolution, the Shawnee fought alongside the British due to their widespread fear over US territory disputes. Due to militia attacks on their villages, the Shawnee were displaced numerous times, and in 1786, the tribe coordinated "intertribal resistance to the white settlement of the Northwest" (Sugden, "Tecumseh"). It was during this transitory period that Tecumseh gained the reputation as a brave and skilled warrior. In 1807, Tecumseh was one of many who spoke at the Chillicothe courthouse to assure the governors of Ohio that the Shawnee

did not encourage any hostility toward the Americans. This may have been one of Tecumseh's most important diplomatic initiatives, later continued in his travels amongst northwestern tribes and his meetings with American and British officials. These meetings and travels to instill peace influenced his reputation as a skilled speaker with charisma, dedication, and courage in times of war, ultimately leading to the justification for early biographers to identify him as the greatest American Indian (Sugden, "Tecumseh").

As Johnston relates below, Tecumseh's father was a celebrated Shawnee war chief who was killed in 1774 at the Battle of Point Pleasant. It is believed by numerous historians that his father's death greatly influenced Tecumseh to become a Shawnee warrior. Tecumseh is portrayed as a strong political and military figure whose behavior was "logical and praiseworthy" (Edmunds 262). It is also commonly known that Tecumseh traveled through the Indian country in 1811 and 1812 to promote a nationalist multitribal confederacy to resist the cession of tribal lands to the US (Sugden 274). Tecumseh may have been motivated to create a Pan-Indian confederacy by observing similar goals from his tribe in 1786, after the Shawnee had already faced the destruction of their settlement. Tecumseh was killed at the Battle of the Thames in 1813.

While Tecumseh has been portrayed as a noble and respected warrior, his brother, Tenskwatawa (The Prophet), was found by early historians to be "ineffectual and inept...a vicious, one-eyed drunk...superstitious and cruel" (Cave 638). Colonel Johnston writes that The Prophet was called "a brawling, unprincipled demagogue" who lacked all the honorable qualities



of his race: "truth, honor, honesty, or courage." These common beliefs spread when Tenskwatawa, who was born Lalawethika, was said to have fallen into a drunken coma in 1805. He was believed to have been dead, and when he miraculously regained consciousness, he expressed that he was visited by the Master of Life and told how to lead Indians to deliverance. It was after this vision that Lalawethika renounced his old ways and changed his name to Tenskwatawa (meaning "the open door") to symbolize his new role as a holy figure (Edmunds 265–66). Additionally, it is commonly accepted by modern scholars that The Prophet was the religious leader at the founding of Prophetstown as a rival community to Greenville. Early and present scholars also know Tenskwatawa's continuous disagreements and miscommunications with Governor Harrison were instrumental in the events that led to the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811 (Cave 651–53).

Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa became influential following the 1795 Treaty of Greenville, which established a boundary line between Native American territory in Ohio and land open for American and European settlement, causing bitter disagreements amongst the Shawnee (Lakomaki 600). As Colonel Johnston writes, unfortunately, the treaty was ignored and white settlers continued to encroach on Indian lands through the early 1800s. Tribes retaliated, causing many Indian and settler casualties (Edmunds 262). During this time, Tenskwatawa established Prophetstown as a place for tribes to unite to "cultivate peace" and "become one great People" (Lakomaki 617). The fighting and boundary disputes led to the Treaty of Fort Wayne (1809), which was an agreement between the United States and selected

tribal leaders, allowing America to purchase roughly two million acres of tribal lands (Dowd 321).

It is at this point in Colonel Johnston's account that readers can begin to question the validity of his testimony and the soundness of earlier Native American historians. John Sugden suggests that because Native Americans were not literate, "facets of their history which did not directly involve the whites remain obscure... and much that was reported by Indian agents, frontiersmen and military officers came as inaccurate rumor" (273). This may be especially true in regards to the Shawnee brothers; although the Americans and British present similar accounts of their interactions with Tecumseh and The Prophet, their commentary is often vague. For example, modern historians agree that Tecumseh traveled to various Indian tribes to promote unity in 1811 and 1812; however, as Sugden points out, Drake and other early biographers "have woven a mosaic of improbable legends about his journeys, while others have overreacted and implied most of those travels never took place" (273). It's troubling, then, to read Colonel Johnston's account without considering the possibility that his reports may have been influenced by rumors about Tecumseh and The Prophet.

The biggest inaccuracy presented in John Johnston's letter is The Prophet's involvement and fall from grace at the Battle of Tippecanoe. Johnston writes that The Prophet encouraged tribesman to declare war against the Americans, but then took no part in the battle. Early Native American scholars commonly believed that Tenskwatawa was a coward at Tippecanoe, hiding from the battle; and that this, consequently, cost him the respect of his followers and the collapse of Prophetstown.

They wrote that The Prophet then became an outcast in the community, was demoted from his role as the spiritual leader, and was forced to relinquish his leadership to Tecumseh, who evidently was so mad about the defeat at Tippecanoe, he threatened to kill his brother (Cave 639–40). Gregory Dowd, however, suggests that this historical account is misunderstood and was presented by unreliable witnesses. Earlier scholarship leaves out the caveat that Tippecanoe was perpetuated by Governor William Henry Harrison leading his men to ambush Prophetstown out of his fear of The Prophet's influence over northwest tribes (Cave 652). Dowd claims the historical account that The Prophet was blamed for Indian losses and that Tecumseh reacted in such a visible display of rage was founded without evidence (322). And modern scholars have identified opposing accounts that suggest Tenskwatawa was still commanding a large following after his "fall from grace" at Tippecanoe. It turns out that much of the first-person accounts about The Prophet's downfall came from rivals of The Prophet and/or Tecumseh. Anthony Shane, for example, dictated to Tecumseh's early biographer Benjamin Drake in 1822. Shane was an individual of mixed origin who lived amongst the Shawnee, but he was employed as an Indian agent interpreter and was loyal to the American government. Modern scholars believe Shane was the originator of the false tale that Tecumseh was "always cognizant of his brother's fraud, was twice on the verge of killing Tenskwatawa, the second time after the Tippecanoe fiasco" (Dowd 324–25). He also delivered the narrative that The Prophet ran from battle, while contemporary sources agree that The Prophet didn't cower away from the battle; that he only withdrew to a higher vantage point to better com-

mune with the Great Spirit, guaranteeing a victory for his men (Cave 658–59). For all intents and purposes, Shane was The Prophet's enemy, yet his biased accounts were accepted as truth by Drake and other biographers into the early twentieth century. The issues with Shane's testimony further perpetuate the belief that much of the scholarship on the great Shawnee brothers was founded upon rumor and prejudice.

In his letter, Johnston inadvertently contradicts Shane's widely-told story about Tecumseh's hatred for his brother. Tecumseh's early biographers wrote accounts of the brothers that suggest Tecumseh did not believe in or follow the religious teachings of The Prophet. Shane encouraged this belief by reporting to Indian agents that Tecumseh never believed in his brother's religion and only followed Tenskwatawa's policies to promote the Indian confederacy he desired. Early accounts, such as Benjamin Drake's Tecumseh biography, often force a nonexistent wedge between the brothers by continually pointing out their differences and underestimating the "strength, resilience, and credibility of their shared beliefs" (Dowd 327). Modern sources, however, agree that Tecumseh was faithful to his brother's religious teaching and that he often preached about it on his travels (Cave 659). In his letter, Johnston doesn't claim to know Tecumseh's feelings for his brother. He does, however, provide accounts of his interactions with Tecumseh which support the idea that the brothers were unified in their beliefs. Johnston explains a time when Tecumseh was a guest at his table at Fort Wayne recalling that he "would not taste any intoxicating liquor, drinking nothing but pure water; would eat no meat, potatoes, and corn bread, and very sparingly of those." Johnston believes Tecumseh did this to further

his message for the clans to remain independent of the white race. Although that is most likely true, his refusal to accept food and alcohol from the Americans directly aligns with The Prophet's new religious teachings. Tenskwatawa instructed the Shawnee to "use only the food, implements, and dress of their fathers" and to abandon all American manufactured items (Edmunds 266–67). Modern scholars believe the brothers shared the goal of unity against Euro-American influence (Tenskwatawa, for religious union and Tecumseh, a political confederacy) and that Tenskwatawa's visions from the Great Spirit may have been the basis for Tecumseh's widespread travels across the northwest territories (Bottiger 29). So, realistically, Tecumseh was following his brother's influence through his daily interactions with outsiders and even spoke in defense of The Prophet. Despite the widespread belief of early Tecumseh biographers, he did not try to surpass The Prophet's power following Tippecanoe (Edmonds 274).

So, when we read Colonel Johnston's letter "The Biography of Tecumtha," we must ask ourselves why early historians, like Drake, pitted the brothers against one another and why Tecumseh was remembered so favorably while The Prophet was condemned. Alfred Cave suggests, numerous times, that part of the answer lies within the interactions between Native Americans and Americans. Indiana Governor William Henry Harrison may have been the ultimate gossip in perpetuating the damning reputation of the Shawnee brothers. Harrison and federal Indian agents listened to rumors that The Prophet's followers were murdering white settlers between 1806 and 1808. The Americans quickly believed that The Prophet was pushing for war; however, after

a few personal encounters, Harrison retracted his negative view of The Prophet and said he was “a good influence on his people and a valuable ally” (Cave 646). Rumors continued to spread across the northwest territories and, consequently, in 1809, Harrison changed his mind again; he grew skeptical of the Shawnee prophet and reported to Washington that Tenskwatawa was planning to attack their settlements. William Wells, a regional diplomat and relative to the Miami tribe’s leader Little Turtle (a well-known opponent of the Shawnee) hated The Prophet because he believed Tenskwatawa’s teachings would disrupt the regional stability. He was suspicious of Tenskwatawa and he may have used his hatred to manipulate and influence Harrison’s decisions (Bottiger 36–37). Wells was known to provide Harrison with conflicting advice, at one time stating his support for The Prophet’s desire for peace and then the next moment spreading rumors that Tenskwatawa asked men to “receive the Tomahawk...and destroy all the white people” (Bottiger 40). Harrison knew about the duplicity of Wells’s observations; however, he allowed these conflicting reports to feed his doubt and insecurity about the Shawnee. Harrison’s main concern was the future of American expansion and, with Wells’s influence, he saw Prophetstown as a roadblock for future land purchases. In her book, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz explains that many American settlers possessed the same fears as Harrison. Settlers wrote a petition to President Madison demanding action against the Shawnee to ensure safety for people and property in the frontier (85). The Treaty of Fort Wayne was a turning point for Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa because Harrison did not

believe the Shawnee had any claim to the ceded territory; therefore, he badgered and bribed Delaware, Miami, and Potawatomi into signing the treaty (Dunbar-Ortiz 85). Tecumseh and The Prophet condemned the treaty and, in response, the brothers threatened any chiefs who agreed to the new land cessions (Lakomaki 618). The treaty may have been the launch for Tecumseh's widespread travels to form a Pan-Indian confederacy. Tecumseh, ever the diplomat, met privately with Harrison to attempt to avert war; he urged for a revision to the Treaty of Fort Wayne to promote a peaceful relationship. Harrison promised to discuss the revisions with the president; however, Harrison lied. He, instead, wrote to the secretary of war exclaiming that the brothers refused to be compliant with the treaty and that Prophetstown must be eliminated (Cave 649). Harrison then led his men to Prophetstown, launched the attack to start the Battle of Tippecanoe, and provoked further violence which preceded the War of 1812 (Gutzman, "Harrison, William Henry"). The Shawnee brothers and their followers continually attempted to reassure agents and American leaders of their friendly intentions, despite the malevolent stories about them. Generally, Indian Agents, such as William Wells, corroborated these tales of violence and decimation to protect the local settlers. One agent who did not, however, is Colonel John Johnston. Johnston worked hard to confer with tribes to dispel rumors against the Shawnee violence, even writing a letter to the newspaper in 1809 to assure settlers that none of the "Indian groups posed even the 'smallest danger'" to frontiersman (Cave 651). Unfortunately, early historians questioned The Prophet's friendly intentions, going so far as to say that The Prophet "hoodwinked"

the agents. Johnston is noted as one of the American Agents who was swayed by The Prophet's convincing plea for friendship (Edmunds 272). Recent scholars have looked closer into the encroachment of the settlers and believe that early Americans "exaggerated, manipulated, and misunderstood the Prophet's nativist message...to empower their own agendas" (Bottiger 30). The agendas, of course, were to eliminate Indian power across the frontier. As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz writes, the "ethnic cleansing targeting Indigenous civilians continued to define US war making through the nineteenth century" (93). Once again, there is no real agreement on what transpired during this time; however, the ongoing warfare against Native tribes may corroborate the idea that the American settlers' goal was to annihilate all Indigenous nations. However, Harrison's habit to lie and exaggerate is quite condemning and may suggest that he perpetuated these rumors as an excuse to enact violence toward the tribes following The Prophet.

The possibility of rumors spreading as truths to justify American violence may be significant in considering how the Shawnee brothers have been remembered. R. David Edmunds believes there is enough evidence that proves The Prophet, not Tecumseh, was "the most important figure in the emergence of the Indian movement" due to Tecumseh's failure to create a lasting multi-tribal confederacy (275). So, why is Tecumseh memorialized as the "good" Indian, while The Prophet was remembered as a cowardly religious fanatic? The answer lies with the ideals of the American government, military, and citizens. Tecumseh's behaviors, particularly his focus on tribal unity with a central leader and his diplomatic attempts to reach peaceful political agreements,



directly appealed to Americans because “it was what they would have done” (Edmunds 275). So, Tecumseh exemplified the traits the Americans and the British valued in warfare and better aligned with their concept of a “noble savage.” And Tecumseh’s peaceful attempts and his admirable and heroic actions, including his “fight to the end,” have appealed to American citizens who, historically, want to celebrate or mourn Native Americans. Consequently, Tecumseh’s biographers romanticized his strengths and, unfortunately, presented a “white man’s Indian” as fact (Edmunds 276). Tenskwatawa, who was viewed as reclusive, cowardly, malevolent, and fanatical, did not “meet white expectations of an Indian leader” (Cave 671). Since there is a lack of true understanding about Shawnee culture and religion, it is easy to see that early American historians did not comprehend or appreciate The Prophet’s influence over his people and, therefore, could condemn his behavior.

With the opposing historical accounts in existence, it is impossible to know what is factual and what is rumor. Even John Sugden, who is often viewed as a premiere Tecumseh biographer today, often uses words such as probably, erroneous, could have, fictitious, may have, and exaggerated to show that a lack of “eye-witness reports” led to a “fantastic story” about Tecumseh (279). With agents and government officials, like Harrison and Wells, spreading false truths, it is hard to tell if Colonel John Johnston shared in the views of his peers, was a true advocate for the Shawnee brothers (and Native Americans in general), or if he was, indeed, “hoodwinked” by a false pretense of friendship. However, when forming opinions of this Indian agent, I urge readers to consider how Johnston asserts himself at

numerous times in "Biography of Tecumtha." First, as Colonel Johnston writes about the failed attempt for Tecumseh's multitribal confederacy:

He appeared too late upon the stage of action; such a spirit fifty or sixty years earlier, might have set bounds to the progress of the white man in the West. In contemplating the wretched fate of the natives of this continent, we are almost instinctively led to approve a sentiment uttered many years ago in the House of Representatives in Congress by Mr. Hopkinson, of Pennsylvania, "that when he beheld the wrongs and ruin of the Indian race, he almost wished that the mariner's compass had never been invented."

Johnston also mentions a time when the Wyandots wished to relinquish the nature of their tribe to become citizens of the United States and the Senate struck down the treaty:

Doubtless that body had good and sufficient reasons in the opinions of the members for so acting, yet it must readily occur to the minds of any one acquainted with the condition of the Indians, their past history and future prospects, that if some such security is not provided for them, a few more generations will witness the total extinction of their race, and then how the weeping page of history will tell of the wrongs and blasted faith visited on the red men by the rulers and people of this nation! How keenly all our sensibilities are enlisted in the cause of the African, yet not a voice is scarcely heard in or out of Congress, to vindicate the claims of the Indian. Is it because no political capital can be made out of the misfortunes of the latter?

Furthermore, the agent discusses his relationship with the chief, Black Hoof, and expresses his companion's belief that Native tribes would never be able to escape the encroachment of white men. The colonel asks, "Is it any wonder that they so obstinately refuse to receive religion or the arts of civilized and Christian people?"

Even though Colonel Johnston presents information about Tecumseh and The Prophet that was founded on rumor, might we look at him as a champion of the Native American people? Might we consider that, if he had known he was reporting falsehoods, he would have advocated against the common beliefs of his peers? Or, perhaps he was simply a man, doing his job, trying to keep the peace across the northwestern frontier? We may never know his intentions, but it is worth contemplating as we read "Biography of Tecumtha."

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